

## **STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN KEVIN SICKEY**

Good morning Chairman McCain, Senator Dorgan and distinguished Members of this Committee.

I am Kevin Sickey, Chairman of the Coushatta Tribe of Louisiana. With me at the table is my brother and Council Member David Sickey, and our tribal attorney, Jimmy Faircloth. I would also like to recognize Council Member Tee LaBuff, and the members of our Tribe who made the trip to attend this hearing.

Many of these tribal members were the first to suspect that something had gone terribly wrong with the lobbyists, Jack Abramoff and Mike Scanlon, so it is appropriate that these tribal members are present for this proceeding. At one time they were referred to as “dissidents” for questioning the lobbyists’ actions – a label provided by the lobbyists to divert suspicion from their own activities.

We are grateful for the opportunity to appear before this important Committee. Your staff has been cooperative and respectful, and we appreciate their hard work.

We will divide our opening statement into two parts. First, I will provide a brief history of our Tribe. I will explain our government and the political environment that the lobbyists used to their advantage. And, I will comment briefly on the harm caused by their fraud. Obviously, the information your Committee is making public today is both shocking and deeply disturbing to me, both as Chairman of the Tribe and as a Tribal member.

Following my brief comments, Councilman Sickey will provide a broad overview of some of the things we discovered in our own review.

Before we proceed, however, we must respectfully qualify our testimony. Neither Councilman Sickey nor I had any direct dealings with Mr. Abramoff or Mr. Scanlon. We were not involved in the decision to hire these lobbyists, nor were we involved in any aspect of coordinating their work. We are both reluctant to speculate about the conduct and motives of the lobbyists, and I suspect that any such speculation or conjecture will not aid the work of this Committee. Finally, because we are currently involved in litigation about these events, we must be cautious in our comments concerning the actions of others.

### **I. The History of Our Tribe**

We are descendants of the Creek Confederacy, from the Muskogee family of tribes. Our ancestors were stripped of 22 million acres of land by the United States following the Creek War in 1814. Approximately 50 years later, a small band of Coushattas settled in the Calcasieu River area, near Kinder, Louisiana.

In 1884, they were forced to move again when homesteaders began claiming their land. They then purchased a small tract of land 3 miles north of Elton, Louisiana.

In 1898, the United States placed 160 acres of land into trust for the Tribe. Unfortunately, the trust was revoked in 1953, which began a 20-year struggle for re-recognition.

In 1973, the Coushatta Tribe of Louisiana was again recognized. And 7 years later, our Reservation was again formally established.

In 1985, we held our first election of leaders by popular vote. We then established our own judicial system, police department, housing authority, and many other social programs.

Today, our Tribe consists of over 850 members, approximately 400 of whom live in the Coushatta Community. We are proud of our culture and heritage, and we are dedicated to maintaining the sovereignty that generations of our ancestors sacrificed and even died to protect.

Our casino and resort opened in January 1995, and since then we have been blessed with economic prosperity. We employ approximately 2800 people, with a total annual payroll in the range of \$80 million. We purchase goods and services from Louisiana vendors in the range of \$40 million per year. And we contribute approximately \$7 million per year to state and local governments. We are proud to be a vital part of the economy of southwest Louisiana.

This brief period of prosperity follows hundreds of years of unjust treatment by outsiders, which resulted in abject poverty and hardship within the Tribe. This is why it is particularly painful that, after all those terrible years, our Tribe again has been preyed upon by outsiders. But on this occasion, at least we are in good company. Certainly within the modern era, no victimization of Native Americans has received so much attention -- no doubt because the underlying scandal has touched so many influential people.

Nevertheless, we deeply appreciate the actions of this Committee in bringing this matter to light.

## **II. Our Tribal Government and the Political Environment that Was Manipulated by the Lobbyists**

Our Tribe is governed by an elected Council consisting of a Chairman and four Council Members. None of the current Council Members were in office when Mr. Abramoff was hired in early 2001. Councilman Sickey took office in 2003. He had no direct contact with either Mr. Abramoff or Mr. Scanlon and very little knowledge of their activities. In fact, he became a vocal spokesperson against them.

Council Members LaBuff, Verlis Williams and I took office this past June. One of our Council seats is currently vacant.

This wholesale change in leadership was in large part a result of the mess created by Mr. Abramoff and Mr. Scanlon.

While Indian Country has seen many con-men throughout history, few, if any, were as skilled as Mr. Abramoff and Mr. Scanlon at creating and then preying on insecurities. They preyed upon our political insecurities, they preyed upon our economic insecurities, and they preyed upon our insecurities about each other.

Our political system is no more turbulent than any other. We, too, have cycles in leadership and influence, and it occasionally turns partisan. The lobbyists came to our Tribe during one these transition periods. And they viewed this as an opportunity for exploitation.

To any decent person, vulnerability in others provides an opportunity to help. But to con-men, like Mr. Abramoff and Mr. Scanlon, our vulnerability simply provided an opportunity to steal. And they hit the jackpot with us: a Native American Tribe with a fairly new casino, in the midst of a political transition, and naive to the underworld of governmental affairs.

They inserted themselves into our internal Tribal politics, excluded and attempted to discredit those who questioned or opposed them, and deliberately created paranoia on both sides by exaggerating threats -- from inside and outside the Tribe.

They exaggerated political threats and they exaggerated economic threats. Then, they exaggerated their ability to deal with these exaggerated threats. And in the midst of this, they incited political upheaval to provide cover for their scheme to steal millions of dollars.

We are pleased to report that the political storm within the Tribe has calmed. And we are taking steps to recover the money that was stolen and to correct our system of checks and balances to ensure that this will never happen again.

### **III. The Harm to Our Tribe**

It is important to understand that the harm caused by Mr. Abramoff and Mr. Scanlon is much greater than the money they stole. Even though this amount is shockingly large, the scar of victimization runs even deeper, particularly because it has touched our leadership.

Moreover, the misconduct of Mr. Abramoff and Mr. Scanlon has harmed all Native Americans in a way that deserves the particular attention of this Committee. The lobbyists actions have created a perception that there is something improper about officials working closely with Indian Tribes.

This stereotype threatens to chill tribal communications with officials who can profoundly influence the well-being of all tribes.

Even worse, it unfairly shifts the blame from where it belongs to the victims. **Jack Abramoff is not a product of Indian Country.** On the contrary, he is the golden-boy-gone-bad of the American political system. Our Tribe and others were victimized when we attempted to fit into the American political system and we were led to believe that Mr. Abramoff was the gatekeeper.

We have begun the process of repairing the political damage to our Tribe's reputation. We have met with several of our state and federal officials, and they seem genuinely committed to providing our Tribe with the same access and the same channels of communication open to all individuals, businesses and special interest groups -- nothing more, nothing less, and without favors or contributions. That is the way the system should work, and that is certainly the way we would like to participate.

There have been a lot of adjectives used to describe Mr. Abramoff and Mr. Scanlon; **greedy** and **corrupt** come to mind. But those are common terms, often used to describe people who forfeit judgment for money. Abramoff's and Scanlon's actions were hardly common. They set a new high-water mark for greed and corruption.

I have read that Mr. Abramoff considers himself a religious man. If that is the case, then I do not understand the basis of his faith, and it is certainly different than ours. Most religions promote compassion and concern for others, and it is clear that Mr. Abramoff and Mr. Scanlon had no concern whatsoever for the welfare of our people.

Your Committee has done a great service for all Americans by exposing this sad affair. There are lessons here for everyone.

I am grateful for the opportunity to address this Committee on behalf of the Coushatta Tribe of Louisiana. Council Member David Sickey will now provide a brief overview of our factual findings.